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The desire to blame Greece for the eurocrisis ensures that the Greek people pay the price, while the elites responsible get away free.

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In the first of two articles on the Greek crisis as a 'trope', [Daniel M. Knight](#) writes that Greece now finds itself subject to a narrative of blame from the countries of the European north, with the Greek people portrayed as the cause of the eurozone crisis, rather than as victims. He argues that this narrative, alongside new waves of austerity, is helping to create a tangible sense of destitution and persecution among the Greek people.

As the ramifications of the second multibillion-euro bailout continue to be deliberated by the Greek government and new waves of austerity envelop the nation, people are left to ponder where it all went wrong. Blame is directed at the external Other—America, Germany, and the infamous Troika of the European Central Bank, EU and IMF—and the “Other within”—corrupt politicians, businessmen, and broken neoliberal promises. Financial mismanagement and “corruption” at the governmental level are rife, but a pyramid effect of dangerous economic activity is now widely acknowledged, as neoliberal rationale [entwines](#) with “traditional” economic relations from the heights of government to the grassroots level. However, the Greek economic crisis transcends local and national borders. With escalating global social unrest and the circulation of blame spawning niche political parties [pandering to xenophobia](#), the Greek crisis highlights the complex relationship between global systems and local experience. Across Europe the adoption of the “Greek crisis” as a trope to provoke fear and stimulate shifts in the realms of governmental power further emphasizes the uneven nature of the international political theater.

Narratives of blame have been formulated by the European right and directed at specific nation-states based on essentialist ideas of culture and economy. This methodological nationalism seeks to clarify abstract global flows of finance and accountability by making examples of peripheral states, thus distracting from substantial economic troubles at home. The focus on Greece as the par excellence example of cavernous corruption, economic extravagance, and social unrest has been manufactured in northern Europe to distract skeptical publics from controversial budget cuts in nations such as France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, the spotlight on Greece—representing 1.9 percent of European Union (EU) gross domestic product (GDP) in 2010 (Greek GDP contracted a further 6.9 percent in 2011)—disguises equally significant problems in larger European economies such as Italy and Spain, which have received markedly different treatment. Greece is portrayed as a cause rather than a symptom of the eurozone crisis, covering flaws in wider reaching European systems.

The Greek economic crisis is employed as a metaphor scaling the levels of local experience and

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Memorial for Dimitris Christoulas who committed suicide in Athens, April 2012. Credit: Yanni Koutsomitis (Creative Commons BY NC SA)

international anxiety. I have worked in Trikala, Thessaly, central Greece, since 2003 as an economic and historical anthropologist. Since summer 2011 a startling development in the Greek crisis has been the impact on peripheral areas, where the search for food and shelter has become as prominent as in the urban centers of Athens and Thessaloniki. This is due to the draining of resources from extended family networks, previously used as the primary coping strategy buffering financial destitution.

The situation in Trikala

In Trikala, the crisis is experienced at many levels, from rising supermarket prices and fuel scarcity to the fear of returning to famine and eras of colonization. Austerity measures create a tangible sense of destitution and persecution, with growing unemployment and frequent family feuds, meaning

the present crisis is increasingly thought of in terms of [previous ones](#), such as the Great Famine of 1941 to 1943 and the Axis occupation. This has a unifying effect, as people believe that as previous eras of hardship have been overcome, so will the current crisis. There is also much cynicism as to the causes of and possible solutions to the crisis and the role of external forces in dismantling the state for future accumulation. The dispossession of public, and sometimes private, property toward international investors constitutes an elaborate privatization program deemed necessary as part of the Troika-enforced economic reforms. However, this does not sit well with local historical consciousness and has become shrouded with conspiracy theories disseminated through the mass media.

Suicide numbers attributed to economic hardship have risen dramatically. A previously taboo subject in rural Greece, suicide is now very much part of local reality. In summer 2012 high-profile cases of suicide discussed in the media resonated with four cases within the space of a month in Trikala alone. Without exception, the person left behind a note stating financial ruin and hunger as the “cause of death.” As Giota, an elderly resident of a village just outside Trikala recounts:

“Two people I knew from the neighboring village have taken their own life within the past two months. One man shot himself after his son lost his job and was unable to pay his bills. He said to my friend that he could not face seeing his son starve to death so invited him [the son] for a final family meal and after he left went to the shed and shot himself in the head. This came only six weeks after another man from the same village also committed suicide after losing his job last year. He could not live with the shame of being unable to feed his family after they lost their home . . . My own son’s job is precarious and I now live daily in fear for his life.”

The global impact of “mediascapes” surrounding the Greek crisis is striking, and Trikalinoi are well aware of the media representations beyond national borders. Capturing the fluid and irregular cultural flows characteristic of international capital, Arjun Appadurai [defines](#) mediascapes as referring “both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information . . . which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media.” In northern Europe the Greek people are portrayed as being equally accountable for the current financial situation due to their open participation in “corrupt” practices and “lazy” work ethic. Trikalinoi are conscious of how the crisis is being portrayed in the national and international media. They say that the little people (*laoutzikos*), may have participated in practices deemed ‘corrupt’ by northern Europe and Troika, but it is *only* they who are suffering from the austerity and financial punishments. The “elites” are getting away free.

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Trikalinoi regularly call for political “elites” to be held responsible for the “crusade of greed” that provoked the most significant consequences of crisis. They acknowledge that many economic processes are endemic in Greece due to partial capitalist penetration entwining with other systemic socioeconomic relations. Patronage and favor exchange are part of everyday life in Greece, from national government to the grassroots level, emphasizing the necessity to view neoliberalization as a historical process with localized nuances, something Troika seem not to take into account.

So far, only a handful of individuals have faced the consequences of their “suspect” actions. One such case was the high-profile arrest of former defense minister and a founding member of the PASOK party, Akis Tsochatzopoulos, in April 2012. Mr. Tsochatzopoulos is accused of heading a money-laundering racket over the course of two decades. This arrest is perceived by Trikalinoi as a “token gesture” aimed at satisfying the public demand for retribution, and the timing of the arrest—less than a month before the general election—is viewed with suspicion. The activities of the *laoutzikos* through thirty years of economic prosperity are not understood as blameworthy within the wider context of political accountability.

A full version of this article will be published under the title “The Greek Economic Crisis as Trope” in *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, Volume 2013, Volume 65 (Spring 2013).

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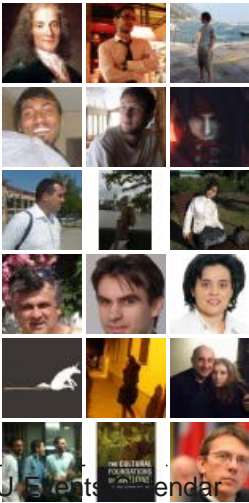
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